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ABSTRACT

Recounted in these two very brief papers are ways a mother arranged the home environment to teach basic skills to her 2-year-old child while enabling her daughter to play in a constructive way. The first paper focuses on learning colors and letters, storyreading at bedtime, and beginning reading activities when the child started to speak. Beginning early reading is the topic of the second paper, which reports the toddler's recognition of letters in upper and lower case and her intuitive understanding of beginning sounds. (RH)

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BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

AND

LEARNING TO,READ WHILE LEARNING TO TALK

by

Sally Goldberg

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BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

If the home environment is what children learn first and best, then why not arrange that environment so that it teaches. Just as children learn the names of their stuffed animals, so they can learn the names of the letters, numbers, colors, shapes, and even words. Just as they memorize their storybooks about Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Cinderella, and friends, so they can memorize storybooks about letters, numbers, colors, shapes, and words.

By means of a carefully planned set of educational materials, my two-year-old child, who was diagnosed at birth to have limited educational potential, has learned the letters, numbers, colors, shapes, to read, and more. Her learning was the result of playing in a constructive way, not the result of long hours of hard work which is difficult for both parent and child.

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One example is the way she learned colors. All babies play with containers that they love to empty and fill. She played with red, yellow, blue, and green ones filled with red, yellow, blue, and green objects. For each color she had a book. The red book had red pages and red things in it; the blue one had blue; and so on. In addition, she had word cards to carry around all over, the color word written in color on one side and in black on the other. Anyone who picked up any of the materials to play with her in any impromptu way was teaching and reinforcing for her the colors.

She learned the letters with just as much fun and just as fast. For each letter of her name, she had a pillow in the shape of that letter that she could hug and hold. In addition, she had all the letters of the alphabet on her six cubed toy boxes. Each side had a different large letter. This gave her increased exposure and familiarity with letters from the time she started playing with toys. With alphabet cards that hung on her high chair, one at a time, she learned those just as fast as she learned the words useful for eating. It is no harder to learn "B" than "spoon, fork" or "cup," even easier.

Can reading really be taught as part of a baby's routine? Bedtime storytime is as good a time as any. I started reading to my daughter even before she could sit up. According to Dr. Brandon B.

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Sparkman, a co-author of Preparing Your Pre-schooler for Reading: A Book of Games, you should begin reading to your child "as soon after birth as you are able to hold your child and read to him." As I read I pointed to each word with my finger, indicating from the beginning that those printed words were telling me what to say. I started with short simple books, often homemade, with one picture or one picture and one word on a page. I gradually introduced two words per page, one sentence, two sentences, and so on. I always tried to find or make books with large print so that I could continue to reinforce the idea that the printed words had meaning.

The time she said her first words was the time the fun began. I wrote each one down in large print on a different colored paper and then attached several pages together to form a book. The individual color helped to fix each word in her mind. In time I presented the words she was most familiar with to her on white paper and found that she could read them there too. Later I introduced some words on white paper, and she learned those just as easily. The principle is the same as when a child begins to recognize pictures. First he knows that a specific picture is a duck. Then he recognizes more and more pictures as ducks. Finally, any duck no matter what size, shape, or color is a duck. So it is with the words. At a certain point of familiarity, generalization takes over. When she started to speak in two-word combination, I started writing

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readers with two-word sentences. I used only words that she could read, also found on a list of the first 50 words children learn to say.

These are some of the many play and learn materials that I have designed for teaching the beginning skills. Most of them help to organize the home environment so that it can help you help your child play and learn. Begin at the beginning and go on from there. In the near future I will be making the materials available to interested publishing companies.

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LEARNING TO READ WHILE LEARNING TO TALK

At 16-months old my daughter said and then read her first words. Each time she said a new word, I wrote it down in large letters on a colored piece of paper and told her what it said. I wrote each word on a different color and bound four or five together, later nine or ten, in folders on which I wrote the word "Book." It usually took one or two showings for her to retain a word. If the word was less interesting to her, it would take several more. As the time went she continued to remember all the words.

The principle behind this approach is the same as when a child learns to identify pictures. First he learns that a specific picture is a duck. Then he discriminates more and more pictures as ducks. Finally, the child can recognize any duck, no matter what size, shape, or color it is. In this case he first learns the word on a colored background and in time can identify it on any

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color and in any handwriting or print.

I introduced all words with a capital letter and wrote the rest in lower case. I used capitals because I also taught her the capital letters of the alphaber at the same time. I used lower case because that is how words are printed in books.

By introducing all words in this manner, I noticed she was able to make several transitions. Once she knew a word very well, she was able to read it in all capital letters or in all lower case. In addition, whatever style small "a" was used made no difference to her. An exciting development was her intuitive understanding of beginning sounds. If shown a brand new word before it was taught, she would make up a word starting with the correct beginning sound.

Why start to teach reading at 16-months old? It occured to me that it might be easier for children to learn to read at the same time they are learning to talk. According to Brandon B. Sparkman, co-author of Preparing Your Preschooler for Reading, A Book of Games, "a child's mental development is determined between the ages of ten months and one and a half years and the basic human attitudes and learning patterns are pretty well established by age three." As a former first grade teacher I remember how difficult it was for first graders to learn to read. Knowing the complicated phonics rules we teach, that so many words break those rules, and that someone who

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knows how to read rarely, if ever, sounds out a word, I was looking for a better way.

With my daughter continuing to learn new words all the time, I have no reason to think she will stop. Now that she is beginning to say two-word sentences, she is beginning her first readers, ones I designed with two-word sentences of words from a list of the first 50 words babies learn to say.

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